WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT JESUS
4. HIS EXAMPLE
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Psalm 118:19–29
Luke 19:28–40

"He went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem."
Luke 19:28 (NRSV)

O Lord Jesus Christ, on this day you walk ahead of us, on your way to Jerusalem.
And with your disciples, we follow behind, frightened, uncertain—
yet compelled by your bravery and your intent.
So startle us again this Palm Sunday morning with your truth and your courage and your love,
and give us strength to live our lives with passion and commitment to match yours. Amen

I was strolling through a department store on Michigan Avenue and saw a friend of mine, a clerk. She is Jewish. I stopped to chat, asked about her family; she asked about mine. And then she said, "What do you think of *The Passion*?" She said, "I know you've seen it because Jennifer here goes to your church and every Monday morning tells me what you said about it on Sunday." Jennifer, also a clerk, talking to a young man—her boyfriend, who happened to be there—appeared, and a kind of seminar at the jewelry counter began. My Jewish friend had seen the movie, had gone by herself, and didn't like it at all. Jennifer loved it. Jennifer's boyfriend, who said he hadn't been in a church for years and appeared to be a fairly happy pagan, told me he had gone to the movie with Jennifer, reluctantly, under protest, and was so impressed he was thinking about coming to church with her. "What impressed you?" I asked. "The fact that the guy went through all that, didn't fight back at all, took all that abuse, the fact that he probably didn't have to—that's pretty good," he said.

It has been a long time since a motion picture has been talked about as widely as Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Maybe never has a motion picture based on a religious topic had such an impact.

Jews and Christians are talking to one another, organizing discussion groups, presenting workshops and lectures. Christians find themselves reading books about Jesus, attending classes about Jesus, thinking about

Jesus, and asking what it is the church believes—and ultimately what they believe—about Jesus.

The critics, as you know, have been overwhelmingly negative. I have accumulated a thick file of reviews, articles, essays—*New York Times, Tribune, New Yorker, Newsweek, New Republic, Christian Century*—all but two of them negative, some more than others, but all but two failed to see much good in the film. The two are Roger Ebert, who said the film showed him for the first time in his life what the crucifixion of Jesus was like.

The other was a fine little essay by Robert Franklin, Professor of Social Ethics at Candler School of Theology, Emory University. Professor Franklin suggested that while white congregations prefer a Jesus who looks like a well-manicured, middle-class model citizen and a "sanitized" crucifixion, black congregations will not be as put off by the violence and will more readily identify with a poor, persecuted victim of state-supported terrorism.

Franklin reminded me that Martin Luther King kept one book in his briefcase always, everywhere he went, right up to that fatal, violent day in Memphis. The book was *Jesus and the Disinherited* by black theologian Howard Thurman, in which Thurman wrote that "whenever we disguise the violence and whenever we sanitize the grotesque image of a suffering servant, we again inflict violence on his identity and mission" ("Black Theology and *The Passion,*" *Sightings*).

Two friends, in separate conversations this past week, wanted me to know that my critiques of *The Passion of the Christ* have missed something important. Both of them wanted me to know about people who were moved and helped by the movie, particularly the part most of the critics don't like, namely the violence.

It was precisely the violent suffering Jesus endures in the film—two hours of almost uninterrupted, bloody, physically suffering—it was precisely the fact of the suffering, my friends wanted me to understand, that was helpful and, in a way, redemptive. One told me how a young man in a deep and severe clinical depression had gone to the movie and for the first time in months responded and was moved. After months of the hellish isolation of depression, I suspect he saw something in Jesus' suffering with which to identify. The other friend told me about a young woman whose life was a mess and saw in Jesus' utter selflessness, his refusal to assert his own ego even to protect himself and save his life, an inspiring example of how human life could and should be lived in contrast to her own self-indulgent and obsessive life.

We live in a complicated and sometimes unfair and occasionally dangerous world. And sometimes—often, in fact—human beings suffer and die due to

circumstances not under their own control. Babies are born with birth defects, young husbands and fathers die of heart attacks, vigorous young women get cancer. One day last week, nine Americans died violently in Iraq. And whatever you think about why we are in Iraq and how we got there and how we are conducting the occupation, regardless, last Wednesday was a sobering reminder that the world is a complicated and dangerous place, that we are not in control of it, that there are enormous risks in deciding to live thoroughly in this world—and that the only way to avoid the risks and dangers is to stay home, literally and figuratively, take no chances, venture nothing. The only way for Jesus to avoid the Passion is to stay home in Galilee.

So, yes, on Palm Sunday, let it be said that Jesus was crucified, that the cross is ugly, that life is sometimes dangerous and unfair and unjust and that somehow none of that—his crucifixion or whatever danger and suffering and loss you and I encounter along the way—lies outside the boundaries of God's love and grace and salvation.

Fleming Rutledge, who preached here three weeks ago, in her book, *The Undoing of Death*, tells about a sign in the window of a greeting card shop: "We make Easter easy," one-stop shopping for all the eggs, flowers, cards, and bunnies you might need. That's exactly how we prefer it, Rutledge comments. Christianity without a cross, Easter without the messiness of Good Friday. William Willimon remembers when the people of his first small congregation put a large rough cross on the church lawn in Lent and the neighbors complained because it was ugly. Willimon says he's always been tempted on the day before Easter to put a sign out in front of the Duke Chapel, where he now preaches: "No one gets in who wasn't here on Friday."

It is a disconcerting day, Palm Sunday is, full of irony and reality. The parade is a crowd pleaser. There is no better moment in the life of this congregation than when our beautiful children parade down the center aisle and fill the chancel, waving palm branches:

> All glory, laud, and honor to thee, Redeemer, King!
> Hosanna, loud hosanna, the little children sing.

It is a great story. He comes from rural Galilee in the north to the city of Jerusalem to join the thousands of pilgrims who flock to the city to observe the Passover, the celebration of the nation's liberation from slavery centuries earlier. The crowds are festive, patriotic. The Roman occupation forces are guarded, nervous. The Roman governor has come from his palace in Caesarea to take charge in case there is civil disturbance, which there frequently is on these occasions.

Jesus is determined to go, it seems. And when he and his small company of friends arrive at the outskirts of the city, he begins to act peculiarly, deliberately: “Go into the village, get the colt, bring it to me.” What is that about? He’s been walking for days—why the donkey for the last few miles? They know, of course, deep in their hearts, where both hope and fear are. They know exactly what he’s doing: he’s acting out their most passionate hope, their favorite promise, always in their hearts and on their lips at Passover, the words of the prophet Zechariah:

> Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
> Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
> Lo, your king comes to you;
> triumphant and victorious is he,
> humble and riding on a donkey,
> on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
> (Zechariah 9:9)

The crowd, already giddy with patriotic fervor and love, knows exactly what is happening. At last—at long, long last—the king is coming. This is it. The Messiah is here. So they strip branches from trees and the shirts off their backs to make a royal carpet for the king. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright says it is a clear and intentional Messianic gesture. Whatever Jesus thought about himself and his mission before today, he is here taking his stand, claiming his identity, committing his life, putting it all on the line.

The crowd grows in size and intensity. Some Pharisees tell him to order the crowd to stop. They’re worried about peace and order and Pontius Pilate’s earned reputation for responding to public displays with harsh, repressive violence. They too knew exactly what Jesus was doing, and maybe they thought it was blasphemy. But maybe they were concerned about him—because what he was doing could get himself killed.

> “If these were silent, the stones would shout out” he responded.

And on he rode into the center of the city, the capital of his nation, the heart of his religion, and in five days he would be dead.

It’s a day of irony and swirling emotion: a day of contrasts between momentary triumph and looming, foreboding tragedy. And what I love most about it is Jesus’ own intentionality, the difficult human decisions that are at the heart of it all and how that is an example of human life lived at its highest and holiest and best.

He did not have to go to Jerusalem, after all. There is evidence that his friends tried to talk him out of it. They knew the risks. They were, frankly, afraid for their own safety. No fewer than five times Luke tells us about

Jesus' determination to go to Jerusalem: back in the middle of the account "he set his face to go to Jerusalem," right up to today's Palm Sunday reading, "he went on ahead, up to Jerusalem."

What I love best about this day is that picture: Jesus, on up ahead, his lonely courage, his strong decision to do it, his brave determination to follow, where he believed God was leading him, in the face of very real risks and danger. What I love best about Palm Sunday is that it was the existential moment for Jesus, the decision to be what he believed God called him to be, a moment that comes to all of us at one time or another when we decide who we are and what we will do.

I've always been inspired by something Dag Hammarskjold wrote: "I don't know who—or what—put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, is a goal." Hammarskjold was a Swedish diplomat, Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953 until his death in an airplane crash while on a peace-making mission in Africa in 1961. His journal, a spiritual diary, was published after his death, and it has been a treasured companion and inspiration to me for nearly forty years.

About Palm Sunday Hammarskjold wrote, "A young man, adamant in his commitment, who walks the road of possibility to the end without self-pity or demand for sympathy, fulfilling the destiny he had chosen . . . still uncertain—but certain—that the answer could only be had by following the road to the end" (*Markings*, p. 68).

Out of his own struggle with the meaning and purpose of his own life, Dag Hammarskjold saw in the example of Jesus' courageous decision the only way to fully live his own life: by making the difficult decisions, taking risks, starting an arduous journey without knowing how exactly it would end.

He wrote, "In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action" (p. xxi).

That sounds a lot like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, another companion and inspiration who wrote from his prison cell, one year before he was executed by the Nazi S.S., "I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life. . . . Later I discovered that it is only by living completely in the world that one learns to believe" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 22).

Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and promising theologian in the 1930s, came to this country to study with the prominent American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Seminary in New York. In a new book about Niebuhr's

life, his daughter describes Niebuhr's frustration with the otherworldliness of the churches in both Germany and America and the determined unwillingness to acknowledge, speak about, and oppose the rise of fascism. Religious leadership in this country, after the horrors of World War I, was pacifist and isolationist. Niebuhr argued that evil must be opposed, with force if necessary, in the name of Jesus Christ. To refuse to take a stand is irresponsible and unfaithful, he argued. His daughter, Elizabeth Sifton, writes, "In adversity, a glaring beam of ethical consequence lights the moment when one chooses action or inaction" (*The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War*, p. 149).

And so Bonhoeffer, Niebuhr's student, decided to return to Germany and share the history and fate of his nation. He wrote to his professor, "I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people." He told Niebuhr that he knew he would have to work for the defeat of his nation in order that Christian civilization might survive. He wrote, "I cannot make this decision in security. I am sure of God's guidance. You must never doubt that I am thankful and glad to go the way which I am being led" (*The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 13).

And so he returned to Germany and eventually committed himself to the Resistance, helped plan an attempt on Hitler's life, was arrested and imprisoned for more than a year, and was executed a few days before the end of the war.

This day is the defining moment in Jesus' life, the day when he says his Yes to what he believes God wants him to do and be; the day when he decides to live thoroughly in the world, to go to the city, the very heart of his nation; the day when he decides to seek God and God's will, not in the safe security of the Galilean hillsides but in the city streets; to be God's man, living out his deepest passion and love, not in the quiet of personal prayer and study and meditation, but in the messy, dangerous ambiguity of the human community, the city.

Scottish theologian George MacLeod wrote so eloquently, "I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the market-place as well as the steeple of the church. . . . Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves: on the town garbage heap: at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and Greek and Latin: at a kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble" (*The Whirlwind*, p. 261).

So fall in behind him as he bravely enters the city. See his example of how human life is to be lived, in courage and integrity and commitment. Watch as he lives out his life fully by giving it away, holding nothing back.

Watch as he bids you and me, his church, follow into the risky, ambiguous world of politics and economics—that is to say, into the world, this world, in his name. See as he leads us to serve our neighbors in his name: the poor, the marginalized, those we can't seem to figure out how to adequately educate and house and care for medically. Follow as he leads us, in his name, into the world he so transparently and passionately loved.

Watch, in wonder, as he lives out his life in courageous commitment, and know that whatever that might mean for you, whatever you are facing—uncertainty about your future, the possibility of danger and loss, the option of risking or not risking, the choice between commitment or opting for safety, or the loss of employment, a precious relationship, health, or life itself—he is with you. Watch in reverence and wonder as he goes on ahead of us, as he shows us how to do it—how to live and passionately love . . . and how to die.

> Here might I stay and sing,
> No story so divine:
> Never was love, dear King
> Never was grief like thine.
> This is my friend
> In whose sweet praise
> In all my days could gladly spend.

Amen.